

Rivington Pike

Lancashire

An Account of

the headless horseman

John Roby

1829



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Author John Roby, Transcribed by Paul Lacey, 2005



Rivington Pike Tower

Lancashire

This beacon stands on a conical hill, at an elevation of 1545 feet from the level of the sea. An immense pile of wood was raised here when the alarm of the French invasion prevailed, at the beginning of the present century.

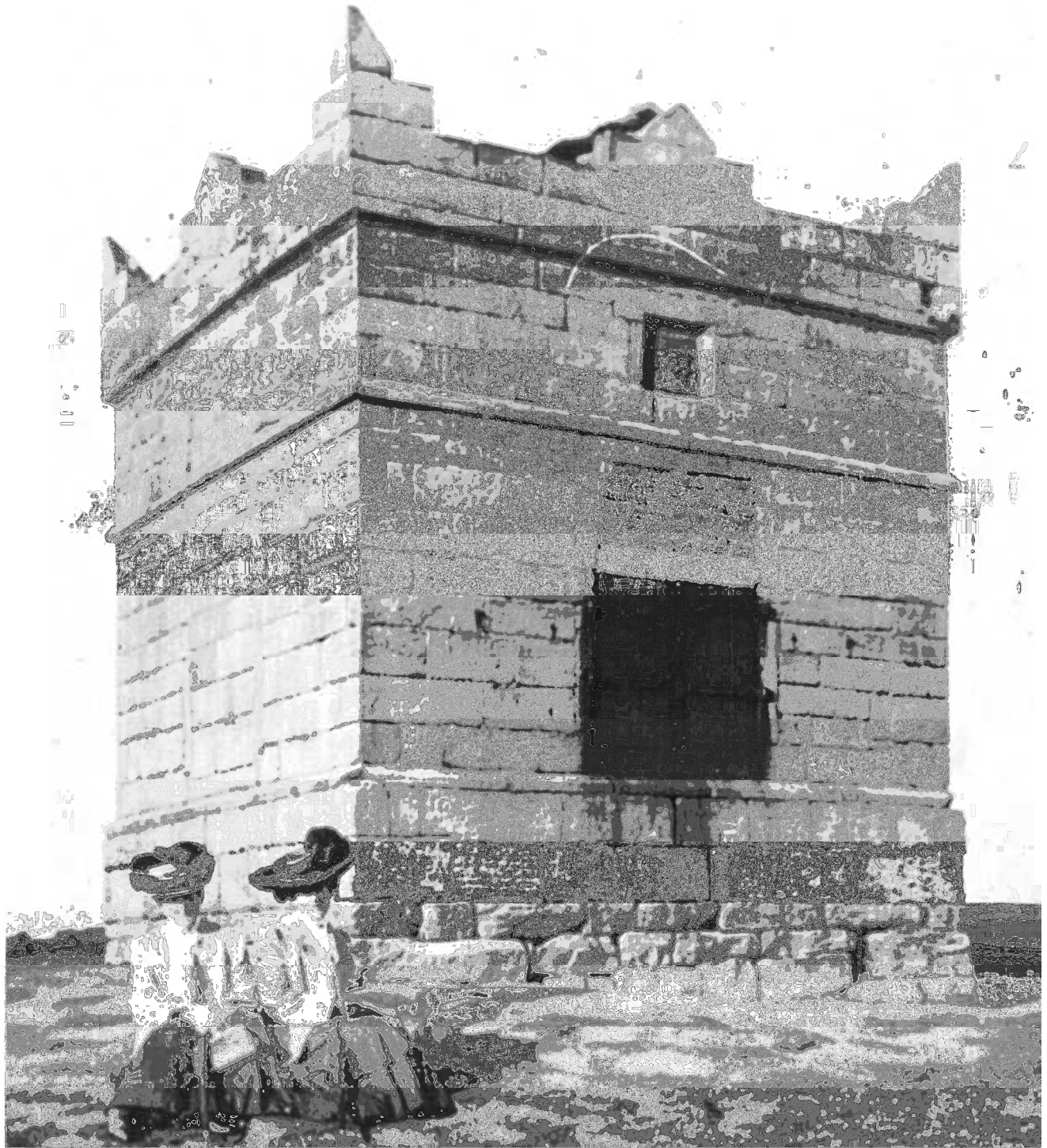


Rivington Hall was for many ages the seat of one of the Pilkingtons, of which family Fuller says—"The Pilkingtons were gentlemen of repute in this shire before the Conquest;" and the chief of them, then sought for after espousing the cause of Harold, was fain to disguise himself as a mower; in allusion to which the man and scythe was taken as their crest.

James Pilkington, a descendant, and Master of St John's, Cambridge, was one of the six divines appointed to correct the Book of Common Prayer; for which and other services he was in 1560 created Bishop of Durham. After the suppression of the great northern rebellion in 1569, headed by the Earls of Northumberland and Westmoreland, he claimed the lands and goods of the rebels attainted in his bishopric. In support of this claim he brought an action against the queen for a recovery of the forfeited estates; and though his royal mistress was accustomed to speak of unfrocking bishops, the reverend divine prosecuted his suit with so much vigour and success that nothing but the interposition of Parliament prevented the defendant from being beaten in her own courts.



The present erection, the scene of our story, was built in the year 1732, by Mr Andrews, the owner of Rivington Hall, whose family have for many generations—with, perhaps, one interruption only—had it in possession.



The evening was still and sultry. The clear and glowing daylight was gone, exchanged for the dull, hazy, and depressing atmosphere of a summer's night. The cricket chirped in the walls, and the beetle hummed his drowsy song, wheeling his lumbering and lazy flight over the shorn meadows.

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It was about harvest-time—the latter end of August. The moors were clothed in their annual suit of gay and thickly-clustered blossoms, but their bloom and freshness was now faded. Here and there a sad foretokening of dingy brown pervaded the once glowing brilliancy of their dye, like a suit of tarnished finery on some withering and dilapidated beau.

A party of sportsmen had that day taken an unusually wide range upon the moors, stretching out in wild and desolate grandeur through the very centre of the county, near the foot of which stands the populous neighbourhood of Bolton-le-Moors. Rivington Pike, an irregularly conical hill rising like a huge watch-tower from these giant masses of irreclaimable waste, is a conspicuous and well-known object, crowned by a stone edifice for the convenience of rest and shelter to those whom curiosity urges to the fatigue and peril of the ascent. The view from this elevated spot, should the day be favourable, certainly repays the adventurer; but not unfrequently an envious mist or a passing shower will render these efforts unavailing, to scan the wide creation—or rather but a circlet of that creation—from an insignificant hillock, scarcely an atom in the heap of created matter, that is itself but as a grain of dust in the vast space through which it rolls. But to our tale, or rather, it may be, to our task—for the author is now sitting in his study, with the twilight of as dull, hazy, and oppressive an atmosphere about him as beset our

adventurous sportsmen at the close of their campaign; enervating and almost paralysing thought; the veriest foe of "soaring fantasy," which the mere accident of weather will prevent from rising into the region where she can reign without control, her prerogative unquestioned and unlimited.

The party to whom we have just referred consisted of three individuals, with their servants, biped and quadruped, from whom their masters derived the requisite assistance during their useful and arduous exploits—the results being conspicuous in the death of some dozen or two of silly grouse or red game, with which these hills are tolerably well supplied during the season. But alas! we are not sportsmen ourselves, and bitterly do we lament that we are unable to describe the

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desperate conflict, and the mighty issues of that memorable day; the hopes, fears, and fire-escapes of the whole party: the consumption of powder, and the waste of flint, or the comparative merits of Moll and Rover, we shall not attempt to set forth in our "veritable prose," lest we draw down the wrath of some disappointed fowler upon us for meddling with matters about which we are so lamentably ignorant, and we are afraid to say, in some measure, wilfully deficient. To the spoils, when obtained, it may be that we are less indifferent; and we hail, with favourable reminiscences and anticipations, the return of another 12th of August—an era which we would earnestly and affectionately beseech our friends to remember likewise, for purposes too interesting in the history of our domestic arrangements to allow them willingly to forget.

But the August in which our narrative opens was many years ago—though not precisely in the olden time—when the belief in old-world fancies and delights was not in danger of being blazed out by "diffusions of useful knowledge," which "useful" knowledge consists in dissipating some of our most pleasant dreams, our fondest and most cherished remembrances. We are afraid a writer of "Traditions" must be looked upon with inconceivable scorn by those worthies whose aim is to throw open the portals of Truth to the multitude; or, as the phrase goes, she is to be made plain to the "meanest capacity." For our own parts, we were never enamoured with that same despotic, hard-favoured, cross-grained goddess, Truth: she "commendeth not" to our fancy; nor in reality is she half so worthy of their homage as her ardent and enthusiastic worshippers imagine. We are more than ever inclined to believe that imagination is the great source of our pleasures; and in

consequence we look not with an eye of favour on those who would persuade us that our little hoard of enjoyment is counterfeit, not being the sterling coin of sovereign and "immutable truth."

Little did we imagine or anticipate that we should be so deviously betrayed from our subject. We never had the temerity to speak of ourselves before. Thoughts, wishes, and opinions were studiously concealed; and if we have been led unwarily and unintentionally from the subject in this our concluding effort, that very circumstance alone is a sufficient warranty against a repetition of the offence.

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The day was fast closing when the party had surmounted the last hill on their return to the valley. For the sake of proximity, they had spent the previous night in a little way-side tavern at the foot of the descent; and they now looked down towards the place of their destination, still some weary miles distant—their prospect partly interrupted by the huge hill called the Pike, of which we have before spoken. From the elevation whereon they now stood the ascent was but short to the summit of the beacon, though somewhat abrupt and difficult of access. When they had gained the ridge overlooking the valley, with the flat and fertile tract of low lands stretching out into the dark and apparently interminable vista towards the coast, the elder of the sportsmen exclaimed—

"Now, Mortimer, mayhap you have never seen a storm in our wilds; but, if my judgment err not, this happy event is in a very auspicious train for accomplishment."

The speaker looked towards the south, where the grim clouds were already accumulated, evidently pouring out a copious blessing in their progress. From the direction of the wind they too were threatened with a speedy participation.

"These summer storms always make for the hills," continued he; "and, looking yonder, I apprehend that we are precisely in the very line of its path."

"I do like to watch the gathering of a storm, Pilkington," replied Mortimer. "Surely the outpouring vials of its wrath must be terrifically sublime in these regions. I would not miss so glorious a sight for the world."

"In a snug shelter maybe at our hostelry below, with a mug of the right barley-bree buzzing at our elbow—oat-cake and cheese conformable thereto."

“Nay, here; with the sky opening above our heads, and the broad earth reeking and weltering under the wide grasp of the tempest. See! how the crooked lightning darts between the coiled clouds, like a swift messenger from yon dark treasure-house of wrath!”

This was said by a third individual, named Norton, a young man who lived in the neighbourhood; a friend and former school-fellow of the preceding speakers—only one of whom, Mortimer, resided in a distant county, and was on a visit with Norton for the first time.

“Like a train of gunpowder, perhaps, thou meanest, Norton?”

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said the less enthusiastic Pilkington, whose residence, too, was but a few miles distant; “and, furthermore, I warn ye all, that unless we can house, and that right speedily, we shall have the storm about our heads, and maybe lose our way if the mist comes on, or get soused over head and ears in some bog-trap. We'll climb yonder hill, Norton, whence we may survey the broil and commotion from our 'watch-tower in the skies,' under a tidy roof and a dry skin. Thou mayest tarry here an thou wilt, and offer thyself a sacrifice on these altars of Jupiter Pluvius.”

The whole party—dogs, helps, and servants—were soon sheltered in the little square tower upon the summit, and the predictions of the elder and more experienced of them were soon verified. Almost on the entrance of the last of the group came down the deluge in one broad sheet, an “even-down pour,” so loud and terrible, accompanied by a burst of hail, that they were threatened with an immediate invasion of their citadel through several crevices in both roof and windows.

A peal of thunder, loud, long, and appalling, shook their shelter to its base. The very foundations of the hill seemed to rock with the concussion. Their lofty tabernacle hung suspended in the very bosom of the clouds, big with their forked terrors. The lightning began to hiss and quiver, and the sky to open its wide jaws above them, as though to devour its prey. The roar and rattle of the wind and hail, mingled with the crash and roll of the contending elements, made the stoutest of them tremble, and silenced several loud tongues that were generally the foremost in jest and banter.

“Well, Norton,” said Pilkington, “I reckon you are not in the mind to try a berth abroad in this rude atmosphere during such an angry and merciless disposition of your deity. 'Tis a mêlée, I imagine, to your heart's content.”

"Norton is hearkening to these rude tongues that do speak so lustily!" said Mortimer. "He can, peradventure, interpret their mystic voice."

Norton was in the attitude of intense and earnest expectation or inquiry; his head slightly turned and depressed on one side, the opposite ear raised, so as to catch the most distinct impressions of sound. His eyes might have been listening too, yet his vision was absorbed, and apparently withdrawn from surrounding objects. He was standing near the window, and

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the workings of his countenance betrayed a strange and marvellous expression of wonder and anxiety.

It grew still darker, and the rain came down in torrents. The thunder-cloud, as though attracted by the height of their situation, kept hovering over the hill, and often seemed to coil round, and wrap them in its terrific bosom. Night, they knew, was about setting in, but they were still unable to issue forth without imminent danger. The thick cloud by which they were enveloped would have rendered it a hazardous attempt to proceed under any circumstances.

"We are in excellent condition for a night's lodging in our good fortalice," said Pilkington: "it hath stood many a close siege from the elements, and will abide a stouter brush before it yields."

"But surely the storm is too violent to continue. I hope we may venture out ere it be long," said Mortimer, anxiously.

"Maybe the clouds will either be driven off or disperse. Should a breeze spring up from the west, which is not unusual after such a turbulent condition of the atmosphere, it will clear us rapidly from these lumbering masses of almost impregnable vapour. I think Norton is still in close communion with the elements. I can yet see his outline by the window. I thought the last flash lighted on his visage as though it would tarry there a while ere it departed!"

The servants were huddled in a corner by the door, sitting on the ground, with the dogs between their legs; the timid animals, terrified exceedingly at every thunder-peal, and shivering, as though from cold and distress. Suddenly one of them began to growl; and a short, sharp bark from another, with eyes and ears turned towards the entrance, seemed to announce the approach of an intruder.

The brutes now stuffed their officious noses in the crevice beneath the door, but immediately withdrew them, evidently in great terror, as they slunk back,

trembling and dismayed, to the opposite side of the chamber, where they crouched, as if to screen themselves from correction.

"What ails the cowards?" exclaimed Norton, who had apparently observed their proceedings by the scanty light that was yet left.

"They are witch'd, I think," said one of the men; "or they've seen, or haply smelt, a boggart."

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"'Tis o'er soon for such like gear; they stir not abroad before the bats and owls be gone to bed," said another.

"Ay! your common everyday sort o' breein' darena' show their bits o' wizen cheeks by daylight; but there be some 'at will abroad at all hours, without fear o' being laid by the parson. The 'Spectre Horseman' I think they ca' him. I've heard my granam tell as how it feared neither sunshine nor shade, but"—
—

Here the speaker's voice failed him, every eye and ear being turned towards the entrance. There seemed to come a sound from without, as though a horse were urged to the utmost of its speed, his clattering hoofs driven to the very threshold, and there he paused, awaiting some communication from those within.

"Nought living or breathing," cried Mortimer, "could come that bent. Perch'd as we are on this tall steep summit, 'tis not possible for"—

"Hush!" said Norton. "I verily think 'tis some adventure which I must achieve. What if I should turn giant-killer; this invisible steed being sent for mine especial use, whereon I may ride, like Amadis or Sir Lancelot, or any other knight or knave o' the pack, delivering damsels, slaying dragons and old wicked magicians, by virtue of this good right arm alone."

"Thou art a strange enthusiast, Norton," said Pilkington. "Thy love of the marvellous will sooner or later thrust thee into some ridiculous or perilous scrape, from which not all thy boasted prowess can deliver thee unshent."

"Hark!" said one of the servants in a whisper. Is not that a knock?"

The loud uproar of the elements had suddenly abated, and the sound, from whatever source it might arise, was distinctly audible to the whole group. A dull hollow blow seemed to vibrate round the walls, as if they had been struck with some heavy instrument. They seemed to breathe the very atmosphere of

terror. A strange feeling, portentous and unaccountable, pervaded every bosom. The quadrupeds too crept behind their masters for protection. Fear, like other strong and unreasonable impulses, rapidly becomes infectious. In all likelihood, the mere mention of the Spectre Horseman, together with their novel and somewhat dangerous situation, had disposed their minds for the reception of any stray marvels, however ridiculous

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or improbable. Yet this impression could not extend to the trembling brutes, evidently under the influence of alarm, and from a similar source.

Another blow was heard, louder than before. Those who were nearest crept farther from the entrance; but Norton, as though bent on some wild exploit, approached the door. He raised the latch, and, as it swung slowly back, most of the party beheld a figure on horseback, motionless before the opening. From the height they occupied this mysterious visitor was depicted in a clear bold outline against a mass of red angry-looking clouds, towards the south-east, on the edge of which hung the broad disc of the moon breaking through "Alps" of clouds, her calm sweet glance fast dissipating the wrath that yet lowered on the brow of Heaven. The intruder wore a dark-coloured vestment; a low-crowned hat surmounted his figure. His steed was black and heavily built. Probably, from the position whence he was seen, both horse and rider looked almost gigantic. Not a word was spoken. The stranger stood apparently immovable, like some huge equestrian statue, in the dim and mystic twilight.

Norton's two friends were evidently astonished and alarmed, but he scarcely evinced any surprise; some superior and unknown source of excitement overpowered the fear he might otherwise have felt. Silence continued for a few moments, the strange figure remaining perfectly still. Pilkington approached nearer to his friend, who was yet standing near the threshold, gazing intently on the vision before him. He whispered a few words over Norton's shoulder. "Knowest thou this stranger, Norton?"

"Yes," he replied with great earnestness and solemnity; "years have gone by since I saw him. Thou never knewest mine uncle; but that is he, or one sense hath turned traitor to the rest. This very night, twelve years ago—it was just before I left home for school"—His voice now became inaudible to his friend, who observed him, after a gaze of inquiry on the stranger, suddenly disappear through the opening. The door was immediately closed by a loud and violent gust. Flying open again with the rebound, the figure of Norton was seen rapidly descending the hill towards the south-east, preceded by

the mysterious horseman. The light was too feeble for enabling them to ascertain the course they took; but it seemed

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probable that Norton was away over the hills with the unknown messenger. Their first impulse was to follow; but the impossibility of overtaking the fugitives, and the near approach of night, would have rendered it a vain and probably a perilous attempt. Looking anxiously down the dark ravine where Norton had so strangely disappeared, Pilkington was startled by a voice from behind; turning, he saw it was the man who had previously dropped those mysterious hints about the "Spectre Horseman," which now vividly recurred to his memory and imagination.

"Master," said this personage, respectfully touching his cap, "you had better not follow."

"Follow!" said Pilkington, as though bewildered; and the words were but the echo of his thoughts; "follow!—I cannot—yet why should we not make the attempt?"

"Step in, if you please, sir. I should not like to speak of it here." He said this hurriedly, in a tone of deep anxiety and apprehension, looking wistfully around and over the dark hills, fearful, apparently, that others were listening. Pilkington obeyed, but with reluctance. The door was cautiously latched; and to prevent the wind, which now began to rise in louder gusts, from bursting this crazy barrier, a heavy stone was laid to the threshold.

"It is—let me see"—said Martin, counting the lapse upon his fingers; "ay,—ten—eleven—'tis twelve years ago, on this very night, St Bartlemy's Eve, my father, a hale old man at that time of day, some'at given, though, to hunting and fowling a bit o' moonlights—and a fine penny he made on't, for many a week, selling the birds at Manchester. Well, as I was saying;—one evening before dusk—the sun had but just cooled his chin i' the water away yonder—he trudged off wi' the dogs, Crab and Pincher—two as cunning brutes as ever ran afore a tail. They might ha' known the errand they were going on, sneakin' about wi' such hang-dog looks, which they always took care to put on when t' ould man began to get ready for a night's foraging. They would follow at his heels, almost on their bellies, for fear o' being seen by the Squire's men; but when fairly astart for the game, they could show as much breeding as the best-trained pointer i' the parish. I am getting sadly wide o' my story, your honour; but I used to like the cubs dearly, and many a time I have played with 'em when I

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wasn't a bit bigger than themselves. They came to a sad end, sir, like most other rogues and thieves besides, and"—

"But we are not getting an inch nearer the end of the story all this time," said Pilkington.

"True, your honour; but I'll piece to it presently. I was a great lubberly lad, I know, and tented the cattle then upon the moors. Well, on this same night, as I was saying, my mother and the rest were gone to bed, my father was upon the hills, and I was watching at home, thinkin' maybe of the next Michaelmas fair, and many a fine bit of fun thereby. The fire was gone out, but I had lighted a scrap of candle, which sweeled sadly down, I remember, in the socket. Well, just as I was getting sleepy I heard a scratch, and then a whine at the door. 'What's to do now,' thinks I, 'that the dogs are here again so soon?' an' without more ado, I lifted the latch, when, sure enough, it was them, dirty draggled beasts, they might ha' bin possed through a slutch-pit. 'Where's yere master?' says I;—the things took no heed to me, but began licking themselves, an' tidying their nasty carcasses, till the house verily reek'd again. 'So, friends,' says I, 'if ye're for that gait, you may as well take a turn i' the yard,' an' without more ado, I bundled 'em off, with a sound kick into the bargain. Well, you see, I hearkened till my ears crack'd for my father's foot; but I heard nought except the crickets, and the little brook that runs behind the house, for everything was so still I could have heard a mouse stir. I opened the door, and looked out, I think, into as clear and mellow a night as ever gazed down from the sky upon our quiet hills. Then I went to the gate, and looked up the road which takes you into the little glen by a short path, away up to the high meadows; but I could neither see him, nor hear any likelihood of his coming. I could ha' told his footstep amongst a thousand, and his cough, too, for that matter. I felt myself growing all of a shake, an' the very hairs seemed crawling over my head; a pea might have knocked me down, and, for the life of me, I durst not venture farther—it was something so strange that the dogs should come back without their master—I wassure some mischief had happened to him. All at once it jumped into my head that he had stuck fast in some of these bogs or mosses, and the rascal curs had left him there instead of their own pitiful carcasses; but that my father should be so forefoughten as to let himself =

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be nabbed in one of these bog-traps I could hardly believe. Yet the dogs—ay, there was the mischief—and the lurching ne'er-do-weels coming back in

such dismal pickle. I went back to the house, for I durst not stay abroad; and yet, when I was indoors, I could not bide there neither; so I walked up and down the house-flags, like as I waur dazed. I durst not go to bed; so there I was, and for a couple of hours too, in a roarin' pickle, that I would not be steeped in again for a' the moorgates between here and Chorley."

"Go on;—we've no loitering time now," said Pilkington; "thy story sticks fast, I fear, like thy father i' the bog."

"Why, I was but rincing the evil thoughts out of my mind, as it were, for they come about me like a honey-swarm at the thoughts on't; and I don't just like their company at present, it minds me o' the time when this plaguy chance befell my father."

"He did not tarry away for good and all, I reckon?"

"You shall hear, sir, if you but gie me a taste o' the flask; for I feel just like to go into a swoon, or some tantrum or another."

Martin took a strong pull at the bottle, and, thus refreshed, he resumed his story.

"Well, you see as how I waited, and my mind was like as it might ha' been set on a pismire hillock, I waur so uneasy. The dogs, too, began to howl pitifully at the door, so I let the poor things in for a bit o' company. I had not waken'd mother; for I kept thinking I'd wait a while longer, and a while longer, as I never in all my life liked to bring bad news. Well, it might be about two or three hours I went on at that gait, an' just as I was pondering as to whether I should go up-stairs or not, I heard something come with a quick step through the gate and up the flags to the door. It was not like father's foot, neither; it was so terrible sharp and hasty. I felt as if I'd been stricken of a heap. My knees shook an' dither'd as if I'd had the ague. Up goes the latch; for I could not stir—I was holden fast to the floor. The door bangs open in a fearfu' hurry, and in comes my father, as though 'Legion' had been at his heels. He looked pale, and almost fleered out of his wits, so I made sure he had seen the bogle that my granam used to frighten us with. 'Father, father,' says I, as soon as I could speak, 'what's happened? ha' ye seen it?' He did not say a word,

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but sat down in the big rocking-chair by t' hob-end, when he filted his head back, and began swingin' back'ard and for'ard, moaning all the while as if he waur in great trouble. I looked at him, as well as I could, for I had lighted a whole candle a while before. I sat down, too, and not another word could I

say. But, my conscience! what a racket the dogs made when they saw him! They jumped, and frisked, and almost cried for joy, as though they had gi'en him up for lost, and were desperately fain, poor things, at his return. The first word he spoke was to these dummies; for they whined, wriggled, and wagged their tails, and licked his fingers, enough to have drawn words from a stone wa'. 'Ay, ay, ye sneaking rascals,' said he, 'ye left me wi' yere tails down low enough, and as fast as your legs could lilt ye off, when I was forefoughten wi'"——Here he looked round, with a face so dismal and disturbed that I verily think I should not forget it if I waur at my last shrift. Taking this opportunity, as I may say, I ventured a word or so. The old man gave me another of those terrible looks before he spoke——'Eh, me!' said he, 'my days are but few now, I reckon. I've seen the'——He stopped and looked round again; then he said, almost in a whisper——'I've seen him, Martin!' 'I thought so,' says I. 'I've seen the ould one, I believe,' says he; 'an' that's more nor I'll like to do again, or thee either. We've done wi' our night-work now, an' the dogs may just go where they can get an honest bellyful.' You may be sure I was sadly fear'd. I durst not ask him how it happened that he should have snappered upon old Sootypaws; but in a while he saved me the speerin', and, as well as I can think, this was the account of his misadventure:—

"'I was goin' up by the Pike,' said he, 'and a brave shower of moonlight there was, weltering on the side of the hill, when, just as I got behind it there in the shadow, I thought I saw somethin' big and black standing among a little clump of gorses afore me. I felt started a somehow, but I rubb'd my forehead and eyes, and looked again. It did not shift, so I thought I might as well make the best o' the matter, an' went for'ard without altering my speed. Well, what should I see when I got nearer, but a great spanking black horse, and a littleish man upon it, who seemed just waiting till I came up. I stood still when I got within a yard or two, expecting he would speak first, for I thought as how it might be some poor body belike that had lost

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his way in crossing the moors. But he did not say a word, which I thought mighty uncouth and uncivil. So making my best speech for the once, though fearful it was some fellow watching to waylay me, I asked him civilly how he did, and so on. Then I asked if he waur in want of a guide over the hills any way. The thing here set up a great rollickin' horse laugh, that frightened my father worse than anything he said; but he durst not turn back for fear he might follow, and happen to catch him as he ran, so he stood still, dithering like a top all the while.

""Canst show me the road to the Two Lads?' [19] he ask'd, as soon as he had gotten his laugh out.

""That can I,' says my father, 'as well as anybody i' the parish.' 'On with thee, then,' says the devilkin, 'and don't mind picking your way, friend, for my horse can tread a bog without wetting a hair of his foot.' My father walked on, but the dogs kept a wary eye towards the stranger, he thought, and hung their tails, an' slunk behind, like as they were mightily afeard on him. But it wasn't long afore my father began to wonder within himself what this unlikely thing could want there at the Two Lads, which, as you know, is scarcely two miles off yonder, and on the highest and ugliest part of the whole commoning; a place, too, which is always said to have a bad name sticking to it. He durst not ask him his business though, and they went on without speaking, until the Two Lads were just peeping out before them into the clear soft moonlight. 'There they are,' said my father; 'and now I'll bid your honour good-night.' 'Stay,' said his companion: 'I may want you a little while yet, so budge on, if you please.' Somehow my father felt as though he durst not refuse, and however loth to such company, he trudged away till they came together to the spot. 'Now,' says the little gentleman, 'lift up that big heap of stones there, and I'll tell you what to do with them.' 'Sir,' says my father, 'you are in jest, belike.' 'Not a bit of it,'

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replied the other; 'see, 'tis easy as flying.' Wi' that he leaps off his horse, and at one stroke of his switch, up they went, jump, jump, jump, like a batch of crows from a corn-field. The dogs set up a fearful howl, and, without once turning to see what was behind them, set off helter-skelter through bog and bush for the nearest, and left my father to himself with the foul fiend. All at once it popped into his head the tales he had once heard about the 'Spectre Horseman,' that was said to ramble about these hills, sometimes in the air, sometimes on the ground, like the dark clouds and their shadows upon the soft grass, without ever a footprint. My poor father could have wished the ground to gape and swallow him, he said, he was so frightened. Where the stones had been there was a great hole gaping, like one of the mouths of the bottomless pit, and try how he would, he could not turn away his eyes from it. 'That's the place,' said this fearful thing; but my father was ready to cower down with terror. He could not speak, but he thought he saw a great long black arm thrust out of the hole. 'Take what he gives thee,' says Blackface, 'and make haste.' But he might as well have spoken to the whins and gorses, for the chance of being obeyed. 'Take it!' said this ill-tongued limb of Old Harry, in a voice like thunder. But my father could not stir, and then there

waur shrieks, yells, and moans, and such noises as he had never heard. The creature looked angry, and full of venom as a toad. 'I shall miss my time,' said he; and with that he began to listen, for there came the sound of footsteps on the dark heather, and then the ugly thing did laugh for very gladness. 'Go, fool,' he cried, 'here comes one better than thee;' and with that he lent my father a kick that might have sent him across the valley, at a moderate calculation, had he not remembered an old witch charm which he mumbled as he fell. How long he lay there, and what happened the while, he did not know, but when he awoke, he saw the heap was in its place again, the moon looking down bright and beautiful as ever, as if she thought nothing particular had taken place. He could hardly persuade himself that he had not dreamed an ugly dream, until he remembered the spot, and how he had been enticed, or rather forced there against his will. You may be sure he made the best of his way home again, where he came in the condition I have just told you. Not many days after we heard that a gentleman of no mean condition,

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that lived not many miles off—I have forgotten his name—and who was supposed to be crossing the hills on that very night, was lost. He never appeared afterwards. It was generally thought he was swallowed up in some bog, but my father always believed that he had fallen into the clutches of that Evil One, from whom he himself had escaped but with the skin of his teeth. From that time to his dying day was he never known to ramble on the moors again; an altered man he became, sure enough, and our big Bible, with the pictures in it, was brushed fro' the dust. He might be seen with the book upon his knee at the doorstone on a summer's night, and the third bench from the Squire's pew at Blackrod church never missed a tenant till my father was laid quietly down in the churchyard."

During this recital there had been a close and almost breathless attention. As he concluded a buzz of agitation pervaded the group; not a word was spoken for a little while until Pilkington exclaimed, slowly passing one hand over his brow—

"A marvellous delivery, which I might have been disposed to treat like other marvels, had not our own senses in some measure left with us a show of truth, or probability at least, about the adventure, which, for my own part, I find it difficult to throw off. Exaggerated and full of improbabilities, I admit, yet the story hath some substratum of truth, no doubt by which it is supported. What it is, would be difficult to ascertain, but the mystery or misapprehension, whatever it be, shall be cleared up, and that speedily."

"Doubtless," said Mortimer; "but first let us return to our lodging. Marvels, being in the inverse ratio to truth, always appear greatest at a distance; and when the explanation comes, we may perhaps smile at our present embarrassment. The riddle is easy when solved."

"True; but how is that to be accomplished?"

"Let us return to our quarters; we may perhaps find that our companion has arrived there before us."

Pilkington shook his head incredulously. Indeed the whole affair had made a much greater impression upon him than he was willing to allow, even to himself.

The moon lighted them on their path as they took the nearest route to their temporary sojourn. Many a cautious glance was cast behind, and many a dark stone or bush—many a grotesque

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shadow—assumed the form they feared to encounter. They arrived at their dwelling without molestation, but—Norton was not there!

"Here is foul play somewhere," said Mortimer thoughtfully. "Think you, Pilkington, that we could find out our way in this quiet moonshine to that same 'Two Lads' which Martin pointed out? I fancy the louts we have about us durst not venture thither. Indeed I think it may be prudent to go unattended on several accounts."

"That is my opinion," said Pilkington; "and as for poking out the way, I can do that readily. I cannot rest without making the attempt, at any rate."

"Let us not create any alarm, but steal quietly off when we have refreshed ourselves," said Mortimer; "we need not tell them of our intent."

"It were best," replied Pilkington, "that we give these knaves a caution first that they bruit not forth the adventure at present, or until we have more exact information as to the nature of the proceedings it may be needful to adopt."

It was not long ere they commenced their journey, traversing the hill-path in the requisite direction. By day, the pillars are easily seen from some parts of the valley below, and Pilkington had frequently passed them in crossing the moors. A pretty accurate notion of their bearing was thus formed from the point whence they started.

The greater part of the way was trodden in silence. The rivulets were swollen with the heavy rains, and great care was necessary to attain their object in safety. The path was not devoid of danger at any time, by reason of the spongy and uncertain nature of the bogs, accumulated masses of spumous unhealthy vegetation, showing patches of bright green verdure, holding water often to an unknown depth, and sometimes proving fatal to those who dare to venture upon this deceitful and perilous surface. By using great caution, and carefully ascertaining the nature of the ground before them, they passed on, without further inconvenience than that of wading through bogs and ditches, climbing stone-walls and embankments, aided by the uninterrupted light of a blazing harvest-moon.

They had now accomplished the most fatiguing part of the ascent, the dark heathery crown of the mountain, whereon the moonbeams lay so beautiful, as though nature were one vast

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region of universal silence, for ever unbroken and undisturbed. It was like gazing on a statue—there was the semblance of life, but all was silent and motionless, the very stillness startling like a spectre.

Soon they had passed through the creaking heather-bushes on the summit, when they saw two rude pillars peeping up from the dark line of the horizon before them. A sensation, not unallied to fear, passed with a sudden thrill across the deep, unseen sources of feeling—the sealed fountains of the spirit. They felt as though entering on mysterious or forbidden ground. The hour—the circumstances which led to their present situation—their companion's recent and unaccountable disappearance, and the prevalent superstitions connected with this solitary spot—all contributed to their present alarms with a force and poignancy unusual, and even appalling. They almost expected the "Spectre Horseman" to rush by, or to rise up suddenly before them, and forbid their further progress into his domains.

"I am not prone to pay much heed either to marvels or superstitions, and yet"—said Mortimer, again pausing after a long silence.

"Why," said Pilkington, "the very air feels rank with mystery. Whatever may be the cause, I never felt more i' the mood for an hour of devotion in my life."

"We may both have need for the exercise ere we depart hence, or my thoughts misgive me," replied Mortimer.

"It may be the mystery connected with our expedition which operates in its own nature upon the mind," said Pilkington. "I feel, as it were, every faculty impressed with some fearful and indissoluble spell. An atmosphere, impervious, and almost impalpable, seems to oppress the spirit. Surely we are on the trail of some demon, and his subtle influence is about us."

"Ah!" said Mortimer, starting aside with a shudder, as though a serpent stung him.

"Heardest thou aught, Mortimer?"

"I thought there was a rushing past my ear."

"I heard it too," replied Pilkington, in a low and agitated tone; "but I heard more, Mortimer. A voice, methought, distinct as thine own, swept by: 'Go not,' was faintly uttered. I am sure I heard the words."

"This place affects me strangely," said Mortimer; "but I will not go back, though the very jaws of the pit were to interpose."

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Suddenly a mist gathered about them, not an unusual circumstance in these mountain regions, but a sufficiently portentous one to fasten strongly upon their imaginations, already predisposed to invest every appearance, however trivial, or according to the common course of events, with supernatural terrors. A gust of wind soon curled the vapour into clouds, which swept rapidly on; sometimes with the moonlight through their shattered rifts, then dark and impervious, shutting out the whole hemisphere, and wrapping them as with a cloak. Still they kept on their way, slowly, but in the direction, as near as they could ascertain, towards the place where they hoped to find some clue to their search. They felt convinced, though neither of them could state the nature of their convictions, that the mystery would here terminate.

The wind came on now in heavier and more continuous gusts, like the distant rumble of the ocean. They fancied other sounds were audible in the blast; yells and howlings that seemed to approach nearer with every successive impulse. A sound, like the rush of wings, brushed past them, and, instinctively, they grasped each other by the arm. A moan was distinctly heard; then another, louder and more terrible. A cry of agony succeeded, then a shriek, so loud and appalling that a cry of horror involuntarily burst from their lips.

"Save us, Father of Mercy!" It was the cry of faith; a look fixed upon Him "who is not slow to hear, nor impotent to save." The cloud rolled suddenly away, unfolding, as though for the disclosure of some mighty pageant.

They saw before them, and within a very few paces, the dark, heavy pillars, looking more black and hideous in the garish light by which they were seen. A cloud or mist seemed to have rolled, as suddenly, from their mental vision; a weight was removed from their apprehensions. They felt as though scarcely acting, previously, as free agents, but impelled by some unseen power, to which every faculty and every thought was in thralldom.

Beside one of the heaps lay a figure, prostrate and motionless. It was the death-like form of Norton! He was, to all appearance, lifeless, with hands clenched, and his whole attitude betokening some recently desperate and painful struggle. They tried to arouse him, and a cordial with which they moistened his lips produced some slight symptoms of returning

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consciousness; but the spark disappeared with the breath that fanned it. The safest plan was evidently to attempt his removal. With as little delay as possible they bore him gently between them; and as the first streak of daylight was dawning over the hills, they had the satisfaction to see him safely disposed of in their little hostelry, whither a surgeon was speedily summoned from the adjacent village. He was yet insensible, but life was not extinct; the medical attendant pronouncing him in great jeopardy, from some violent struggle and exertion, both of body and mind. Rest, and the most careful attention, were absolutely necessary, lest, with returning consciousness, reason should be disturbed, and the mind remain bewildered from the agitation previously undergone.

For several weeks this unfortunate victim, as they supposed, to his own vague and supernatural terrors, lay without showing the slightest symptom of recognition. Groans and incoherent murmurs, after long intervals of silence, proclaimed that life was yet lingering on the threshold of the tabernacle, unwilling for her flight. A cry of terror would sometimes break forth, and his whole frame become violently convulsed, while he seemed to exhaust himself in struggles to escape.

We will not prolong the recital, nor is it needful to relate how the first light glimpse broke through the clouds that had so long veiled his spirit. Fearful were the first awakenings of the soul. Like the last dread summons, it was not an awakening from oblivion. Every faculty wore the dark impress of terror, though he remained apparently unconscious of the interval that had passed. Pilkington and his friend were unremitting in their attentions. The issue was long doubtful; but in the end he recovered from the dread hallucination

under which he laboured. With restored health, he disclosed, to them only, the events which had occurred in the brief interval of their separation.

"I think I before told you," said he, reluctantly commencing the narrative, "that the figure who appeared so mysteriously at the door of our temporary shelter on the hill wore the very image of my uncle, whom you never knew, Pilkington. You may conceive that my surprise was excessive, though I cannot say that I felt so; but it will, in some measure, account for my apparent rashness and eager determination to follow, when I inform you that it was just twelve years previously, on that

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self-same night, the eve of St Bartlemy, when his unaccountable disappearance on these moors, of which I have before spoken, threw consternation and distress into the hitherto peaceful and happy community with which he was associated. I need not recount the family disasters and disagreements which his mysterious absence has originated. No trace was left of his disappearance; nor could his body ever be discovered. The night prior to our excursion I saw him; but it was in a dream. This circumstance, together with the place and the very time, twelve years since his departure, was the cause of my apparent thoughtfulness and abstraction prior to the appearance of our mysterious visitor. I felt an apathy; and, at the same time, a load upon my spirits for which I could not account. I remember that I was scarcely alarmed, or even surprised, when he presented himself; and that I felt as though I had been waiting for his arrival—more under the bewildering influence of a dream than the sober conceptions of waking truth. I made no doubt but that the mystery would now be elucidated. I followed the retreating horseman, who, I saw, beckoned me forward, and occasionally seemed to chide my tardiness and want of speed. I could not hear his voice, but I thought he pronounced my name. He descended the hill with considerable haste, and it was with difficulty that I could now keep him in sight. Fully bent on the discovery, I resolved, if possible, let the consequence be what it might, that I would follow. The storm had suddenly abated, and the clouds were rolling off in broken masses through the calm ether, from which the moon crept out, by whose aid I hoped to keep in view the object of my pursuit.

"The path he now took led up the ascent on the opposite hill. I clambered up with some difficulty, but the flying horseman before me seemed to accomplish the work without either hesitation or inconvenience. He waited for me when he had surmounted the steepest part of the acclivity, and I grew more and more convinced that it was my uncle's form, as I had seen

him in my boyhood. Memory was sufficiently tenacious on this head; and knowing the great need, as it concerned family affairs, that his fate should be clearly ascertained, I braved all hazards, and still followed this mysterious conductor. I do not recollect I felt any apprehension that I was following a supernatural guide; or that it might possibly be a phantom who was luring me on to misery and destruction. The mild, benevolent

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aspect of my relative was before me, and I could not associate an idea of danger with the guide and protector of my youth.

"As I gained the brow of the hill I saw the dark form of the horseman dilated upon the wide, bare, uninterrupted horizon, in almost gigantic proportions. It might be the distance that caused this illusion, but the huge black horse appeared to wax in magnitude with every step, and to become more fiend-like and terrible. Still I followed, and ere long I beheld the two pillars unto which our course was evidently tending. They seemed to rise up from the earth like huge giants waiting for their prey. My guide, whom I had previously attempted to overtake, stood still when he reached them, awaiting my approach. With feelings strangely akin to those of an ill-fated victim, urged by some resistless fascination into the very jaws of his destroyer, I drew nearer to the object of my hopes and apprehensions. I recognised the very dress my uncle wore on ordinary occasions, and the strong square-built form that in my childhood I was accustomed to view with a parental regard. Yet was I disquieted with alarm and agitation. Horrible images rushed upon my brain. I seemed to be the sport and prey of some power I could not withstand—a power that apparently might wield my very faculties at his will, and had already taken the reins of self-government into his own keeping. I began to fancy that it was some terrible vision by which I was harassed; and I well remember it was the precise feeling that haunts us in our dreams when a horrible doom is approaching from which apparently there is no escape; and yet we feel as though assured some way will be opened for our deliverance. While we endure all the horrors of our situation, we know of a surety that our miseries shall soon terminate. Yet a cloud was gathering upon my soul, and objects assumed another hue seen through its wild and chaotic elements. With all the vagueness and uncertainty of a dream, I felt that I was awake!

"'Dost thou know me?' said the mysterious inquirer, in a tone which I immediately recognised. Still there was an awful and thrilling emphasis in the expression which alarmed me more than before.

"'I know you,' I replied, 'as the friend and guardian of my youth; but—to what end am I called hither, and why are you thus?'

"'My path is hidden!' said he, in a voice terrible and foreboding.

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"'Tell me, where have you been? Is this your habitation? unless'—shuddering, I added in a low but energetic tone—'unless you are some evil one that hath ta'en his semblance to lure me to my hurt.'

"'When the moon rides o'er the blue south 'tis midnight; I will then reveal what thou hast desired, and the purpose of my coming.'

"'Art thou really he whose form thou bearest? Answer truly, as thou dost hope for my stay.'

"'I am!' he replied, in a tone so like that of my uncle that I was now satisfied his very form was before me. Conjecture was vain as to the motives that prompted this long and extraordinary concealment.

"'Promise, Norton, that thou wilt tarry here until my return!'

"'I will; but give me some pledge, some proof that thy being is real; that thou comest not as a phantom to delude my hopes.'

"He stretched out his hand. I again felt the warm pressure of my earliest friend, whom I had so long mourned as dead. I would have embraced him, but he shrunk back, and I saw the black steed again preparing and impatient to depart.

"'Remember,' said he, in a hollow voice, 'at midnight I will return.'

"I leaned against the stone, determined to await the arrival of my mysterious relative, who would, I was convinced, on his return satisfactorily elucidate his proceedings. Occupied with vain surmises and reflections, time passed on almost unperceived; and ere I was aware the black steed was at my side. The rider suddenly dismounted. I drew back, instinctively, as he approached; for I saw, in the still clear light of the unclouded moon, his countenance hideously distorted and almost demoniacal in its expression.

"'Thou art mine!' said he, laying one hand upon my shoulder; 'and thou shall know too soon my terrible secret.' He came nearer; I felt his breath upon my face; it was hot and even scorching; I was unable to resist; he clung round me like a serpent; his eyes shot livid fire, and his lips—hideous, detestable thought—his lips met mine! His whole spirit seemed diffusing itself throughout

my frame. I thought my body was destined to be the habitation of some accursed fiend—that I was undergoing the horrid process of demoniacal

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possession! Though gasping, almost suffocating, for I could not disengage myself from his deadly fangs, I exerted my utmost strength. One cry was to Heaven, but it was the last; the soul seemed to have exhausted herself with the effort. All subsequent and sensible impressions vanished; and I remember nothing save horrible incoherent dreams, wherein I was the sport and prey of demons, or my own body the dwelling-place of some ever-restless and malicious fiend! From the long night of insensibility that ensued I would be thankful that reason has awaked without injury; and though fearful beyond the common lot of mortals has been my destiny, yet I would render homage to that Power whose might rescued me from the very grasp of the Evil One!"

The listeners were appalled, horror-struck beyond measure, at this fearful narrative. Its mysteries they could not solve by any reference to the usual course of natural events; no key that nature holds would unlock this dark and diabolical mystery. To his dying day Norton firmly believed that his uncle's body was the abode of some foul spirit, permitted to sojourn upon earth only on the fearful condition that he should effect his entrance, at stated periods, into a living human frame, whose proper occupant he might be able to dispossess for this horrible purpose. Many circumstances would seem to corroborate this belief. The adventure of the old poacher, in particular, happening precisely on the night of his uncle's disappearance, led Norton to conclude that the foul fiend was obliged to renew his habitation upon every twelfth return of the holy festival of St Bartholomew. That a solution so inconsistent with our belief in the constant care and control of an all-wise and an all-powerful Providence was incorrect, we need not be at any pains to prove in this era of widely-disseminated knowledge and intelligence. Still, a mystery, inscrutable under the ordinary operations of nature, appears to hang over the whole proceeding, and though a legend only, yet the events bear a wonderful semblance and affinity to truth, even in their wildest details.

It is said that the "Spectre Horseman" appeared no more, and that having failed in fulfilling the terms by which his existence upon earth was, from time to time, permitted and prolonged, he was driven to his own place, where he must abide for ever the doom of those kindred and accursed spirits whose aim it is continually to seduce and to destroy.

[END OF EXTRACT]

